

Fixing the Retirement Pay Gap for Soldiers in Guard and Reserve

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By Rep. Joe Wilson (R-S.C.)

Member of the House Armed Services Committee

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As a 31 year veteran of the Army Reserve and National Guard, I hold a special place in my heart for the men and women of the National Guard and Reserve. These citizen soldiers have a distinguished history and tradition of service. For many who choose to have a career outside of the regular military but feel a calling to serve their nation in uniform, they have often found a place in their state's National Guard forces. In recent memory, their duties have been confined mostly to missions within the United States - humanitarian relief, natural disaster response, and emergency management roles.

The National Guard and Reserve, today, plays an integral role in the defense of our nation overseas. More importantly, they have moved from a strategic reserve to an operation force and are serving in combat zones. Since September 11, 2001, more than 600,000 members of the reserve components have been mobilized in support of military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and for other contingency operations. More than 145,000 members have been mobilized more than once during this period.

Their efforts demand that we reexamine our policies in regards to pay and retirement benefits for National Guard and Reserve members. Our policies should reflect the new sacrifice these units are being asked to make.

Prior to January 2008, National Guard members and Reservists, unlike regular active military, had to wait until the age of 60 before they were eligible to receive retirement pay. In the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) of 2008, Congress addressed this situation by creating a credit system for those that served on active duty status, allowing Guard and Reserve members to receive retirement benefits before the age of 60. The new law provides that for every 90 days mobilized for a contingency operation, three months of credit will be given toward retirement. Thus, a Guardsman mobilized for 12 months would start receiving retirement benefits at the age of 59, instead of age 60.

However, there is a devil in the details.

When Congress amended the law to offer early retirement benefits for members of the reserve components who are mobilized in support of the Global War on Terrorism, the changes only reflected active duty service from the time of enactment of the new law. Active duty service prior to that date would not be counted toward this early retirement credit system. In light of the tremendous sacrifices these soldiers have made since September 11th, there is a need to make sure that the change in law reflects their service for the over six years since that terrible day which transformed military service.

At the beginning of this year, I introduced legislation to fix this gap in eligibility. The National Guardsmen and Reservists Parity for Patriots Act (H.R. 4930), simply amends the date of enactment to September 11, 2001. This would cover all the Guardsmen and Reservists who were mobilized and honorably served our nation in the Global War on Terrorism.

I have seen firsthand the incredible work our National Guard and Reservists do - both as a member of the Guard and as a father of four sons serving in the military with two as Iraq Veterans. My visits in Afghanistan with members of my home state's South Carolina Army National Guard - including my old unit, the 218th Enhanced Separate Brigade - have reinforced my support for making this necessary change. It is disappointing that we would work to provide this retirement credit and yet instill such a gap in eligibility.

Our nation has a long road ahead in the Global War on Terrorism. The brave men and women of our regular military and the citizen soldiers of our National Guard and Reserve will answer the call of duty. The American people can be confident that they will be protected by the strongest and most advanced fighting force the world has ever known. We should honor the sacrifice of so many by ensuring that we take care of our returning veterans and their families.

Congressman Wilson represents the Second Congressional District of South Carolina. He is the recipient of the AUSA Third Region's 2008 Major General Robert F. Cocklin Award.